



BEYOND THE BASICS

of Experiential Learning

Adequate preparation, before and after a learning exercise, can make all the difference.

By Merrick Rosenberg

If there is one area in which trainers have wholeheartedly embraced experiential learning, it's in the team building realm.

Right from the start, team building facilitators devised all sorts of exercises that helped learners experience team dynamics rather than just talk about them. And yet, if there's one main criticism of team building, it's that these programs are more about playing games than they are about changing behavior.

After 17 years of leading team building programs, I must concede that this concern is valid. The activities can be quite fun and engaging, but often they do not have the desired effect when everyone returns to the office.

Think of team building on a continuum of levels between one and 10. At level one, teams want an exciting, memorable, and bonding experience. At level 10, teams need to solve issues of trust, conflict, and collaboration. All too often, teams participate in levels one, two, or three team building sessions based entirely on interactive exercises and yet, they expect level 10 results.

Learning to have fun

Trainers know that experiential activities contribute to learning. But it's what takes place prior to the event that opens the mind to learning and what occurs after the event that reinforces new skills and insights.

The naysayers are partially correct: Playing games won't change behavior. However, as you will see with the

examples below, adequate preparation before and follow-up after the experiential learning exercise can play a significant role in transforming both individual and team effectiveness. Below are several different approaches to team building with very different needs and objectives.

A pharmaceutical company's sales team that was spread across five regions in the United States worked hard, but rarely saw each other. The vice president of sales wanted a fun, get-to-know-you session. They wanted to build relationships and enjoy a day together as a team. Such aims would fit within level three.

The group was split into teams of five participants, one from each region. During the half-day session, each group was equipped with a hand-held GPS unit and a set of clues. Their challenge was to navigate the team to all of the points listed in the GPS units, and then once there, solve a puzzle to earn points. The natural competitiveness of the sales team created immediate energy. The laughter that they shared helped to develop bonds that lasted long after the training program ended. The debrief session related the experience to real-world challenges such as planning and communication. In this case, experiential learning was exactly what they needed to meet their goals.

A national healthcare provider was looking for a half-day team building program for 36 information technology (IT) professionals. The executives believed they had no significant leaders among team members. Their goal for the session was to generate insights into working together better as a team. Individuals participated in a one-day session that contained two components: a team building activity in the morning and the DiSC Behavioral Profile, a personality assessment report, in the afternoon.

Prior to the session, participants knew very little about what they were about to experience. This fueled anticipation and excitement. The stage was set with an introduction using space-

age music and an interplanetary slideshow. Teams were grouped in squads of six people who were now primed for an Intergalactic Adventure, a team building simulation game where participants attempt to foil an alien invasion of Earth. Players can only achieve their final objective by sharing information and working together in a large group.

The exercise sparked discussion about many parallels found within the workplace such as effective planning, working toward a common mission, coordinating efforts between various teams, and celebrating small victories.

In the afternoon, participants learned about themselves and their teammates by participating in the training module called, Why We Click with Some and Clank with Others. This part of the program was based on the DiSC Behavioral Profile and was designed to keep them laughing and learning. Interactive exercises helped participants to understand different styles and overcome barriers to effective communication. By increasing understanding of each other's needs, they learned how to create a more productive work environment.

Team members not only built stronger relationships, but also realized that they had significant communication breakdowns within the IT department. They decided to hold monthly meetings with one person from each team. A different team member was designated each month. Meetings focused on the discussion of specific communication breakdowns and methods to achieve clarity. Six months after the event, meetings are still being held. The IT department reported significant improvements in communication, teamwork, quality, and productivity. Their continued focus on creating a more positive and successful work environment made all the difference.

A boat manufacturer with significant conflict among its 10 senior managers needed to improve communication. Team members routinely spoke negatively about each other. Stress was high.

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Morale was low. Communication was volatile or nonexistent.

People treated each other disrespectfully. One of their staff members joked with me that the senior managers "like to throw each other under the bus, then back up and use that person for a speed bump." Nobody was laughing. James A. Autry once said, "A workplace without conflict is a workplace without creativity." If that were true for this team, they would have been one of the most creative teams that I ever met. Unfortunately, that was not the case.

The president of the organization indicated that the team would resist team building exercises. He was adamant that they were well beyond "playing games." He was correct. However, an experiential component would ultimately be critical to creating long-term change, though only if activities were woven into a more comprehensive process that included assessment, training, and coaching.

Three weeks before training day, team members completed an online survey. This gave each member the

TEAM BUILDING DOs AND DON'Ts

If you want a day of fun, an experiential learning program is all you need. But for organizations seeking behavioral change, what happens before and after the training makes the difference. Consider the following:

- For programs at levels one to three, experiential activities can stand alone and will meet your goals.
- For groups that want or need a program in the levels four to six range, reinforce the experiential exercises with follow-up activities and reminders of the experience.
- For teams in the levels seven to 10 range, pre-work and follow-up sessions make the difference. Select activities that replicate the group's issues so that discussions address real-world challenges. Re-assess progress at a future date and make team ground rules a part of every meeting.
- No matter what level of team building is conducted, trigger the brain to remember previous experiences. Display team ground rules and create reminders to keep them in front of people. Display pictures of the event to spark memories of the experience, whether it is the fun they shared or the insights they gained.

opportunity to provide quantitative and qualitative feedback about the team and the work environment. Conflict and lack of understanding of each other's needs was tearing the group apart. They needed to develop relationships among team members if the environment was to improve. In addition to completing the team survey before the session, each individual also completed an online version of the DiSC Behavioral Profile.

During the program, participants engaged in discussions and team activities that enabled them to experience their team dynamics in action. They recognized how their behavioral styles affected how they worked together. They discussed how these behaviors played out in the workplace, for better and for worse.

Training professionals know that for change to occur, individuals must take

personal responsibility to behave in ways that lead to success. The discussion was based on the team survey report and guided team members to establish ground rules that clearly stated desired behaviors for which they can hold themselves and others accountable. For example, team members agreed to "speak only in positive terms about those who are not present." They also committed to meeting directly with the person with whom they have a conflict. These ground rules played a significant role in creating a more positive work environment by changing the culture.

The combination of activities, the behavioral profile discussion, and the team survey review led to both individual and team action planning. Yet all too often, individuals attend team building programs only to return to the office with good intentions but no

real commitment to apply new skills and behaviors.

Therefore, one week after the session, I put on my coaching hat and spoke with each team member for 30 minutes to discuss what he was going to do to create the desired work environment. I encouraged each team member to commit to building a better relationship with one specific member of the team, and we identified one ground rule that they were most likely to violate. These coaching sessions guided team members to take personal accountability for the team's success.

Team building is a journey, not a destination. Therefore, even beyond the coaching sessions, we included additional follow-up activities to reinforce learning and make team building a process, not solely an event. A team survey was conducted six months after the original session, and the results were dramatic. On a scale of one to 10, with one being the lowest score, trust and morale scores went from an average of three to seven. Communication items improved from the four to seven as well. Team members reported that it was like "working for a different company."

Tossing a ball around and climbing ropes won't satisfy every team. If you create a team building process that corresponds to the group's needs, the experiential component will be memorable and contribute to overall success.

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